

STAGES OF GRIEF IN CHILDREN

Once you have given your child/children an explanation of what has happened, you must still deal with their grief. Your child must work through the three stages of grieving:



- DENIAL shock, numbness
- ACUTE GRIEF sadness, depression, anger, guilt, anxiety, fears, regressions, physical distress
- ADJUSTMENT painful acceptance of reality; reestablishment of life

There is nothing in the life of children to prepare them for death. While children pass through the same stages of grief as adults, because of their limited life experiences, they will grieve *differently* than adults. It is important to remember that *every* person and child grieves differently and at his or her own pace.

All stages of the grief process are necessary. Denial may be very functional for a while. An apparent lack of concern may be your child's way of coping with your infant's death. It is normal if your child reenacts the funeral in play and/or pretends to be sick or dying in a play situation. Acting out feelings through play is a child's way of dealing with fears and emotions that he/she is not able to express verbally. If an unconcerned and unknowing attitude *continues* in your child, he/she should be encouraged to talk about their feelings and emotions. Do not be afraid of making your child cry – tears can be a much needed safety valve.

Grief and anger can often lead to disruptive acting out behaviors. Many of these are normal and should be accepted with calmness. However, this does not mean that your grieving child should never be disciplined. The amount of energy expended to discipline your child while you are grieving is certain to be less than that required to correct a behavior problem that is allowed to develop for months or even years.

Your grieving child needs permission and opportunity to grieve, someone to talk to, and reassurance of being loved. Gentle discipline is as important an aspect of that reassurance as hugs and kisses. Gentle discipline reinforces love and reassures your child that eventually everything will be all right again.

Children, like adults, need to express their pain and grief. They need to be allowed to act out their feelings in ways that do not always seem appropriate to an adult; they may not be able to say what they feel with words, and must depend upon body language and behavior to vent their feelings.

A common emotion in grief is anger. Anger will come in several forms. It may be directed at your infant who has died for deserting them or you as their parent. It may be directed toward those "held responsible" for the death, such as God, doctors, nurses, etc. It is best for your child and others involved with your child to encourage expression of and discussion about their angry feelings.

Children want information about, and participation in the grief process. Allow them to ask questions, for it is part of their grieving process. Be straightforward and honest about your baby's death. Being evasive may cause problems later. Not knowing/understanding the real situation may prevent your child from confronting and working through their feelings.

Most children over age six should attend the funeral unless they are *unwilling* to go; no child should be forced to do so. If your children are between the ages of three and six, personal judgment is needed. "Rehearsing" what will happen at the funeral is good preparation. If the body is to be cremated or donated, these procedures will need to be explained to them.

Children take death very personally: they often feel that they are either responsible for the death, or that they are being punished for some misdeed. Children are steeped in the theory that bad things happen to them when they are naughty, and younger children firmly believe in magic. An earlier hostility, even a dream or a wish that that person might die, can burden the child with terrible guilt and remorse.

Children often feel abandoned, that the deceased has “run out on them,” and may experience fears of further abandonment or an inability to trust others. This fear may lead to hostility toward those who are closest to them.

The youngster from three to five may deny death as a regular and final process. To them, death is like sleep; you are dead and then you are alive again . . . or like going on a journey; you are gone, then you come back again. Between the ages of five and nine, children appear to be able to accept the idea that a person has died, and that they will not “return.” But they may not accept death as something that must happen to everyone, particularly to themselves. Around the age of nine, a child recognizes death as an inevitable experience that will occur to them.

You can help your child to understand what has happened by being honest and providing reassurance. The effort to reassure your child by falsehood is doubly damaging because your child will inevitably find out that they have been deceived, and then must not only deal with the deception but with their *deceiver*. Children will no longer have a basis for trusting that person as a dependable source of information.

A child's fears and fantasies are usually far worse when they are not told what has happened in a clear and precise way. Use correct medical terms. This helps your child understand the reality of the situation.

Unhealthy explanations of death include “God taking someone away because He loved them” and “being in heaven.” Children may begin to equate living to an old age as evidence of *not* being good, and may wonder why they should be good if God's reward is death. They may become angry with God, or may develop a fear of “being next to die” if they are good. Younger children may be “haunted” by fears of the person “watching them from above,” or may simply not understand why the body stays in the ground if the person “goes to heaven.”

Many parents, in trying to answer questions about death, tell their children things they do not themselves believe because they simply can't think of anything else to say. If we as individuals and a society could ourselves come to terms with death, we could do a better job of telling our children about it.

The grief process is coming to a tentative end when there is the painful acceptance of the reality of the death, the reorganizing of life around the new circumstances, and the reestablishment of normal relationships and activities. However, at birthdays, holidays, and anniversaries of the death, grief is revisited. This is a normal and predictable part of the grieving process. These periods, over time, will become less and less painful for your child, and – while a sadness and loss remains – most of the pain will hopefully be replaced by cherished memories.

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